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From the ranch to Cloudcroft, New Mexico, the elevation ascends from 2550 feet to 9000 feet above sea level. Ground travel time runs seven to eight hours. The time change from Mountain to Central shows a one-hour loss.

The most dramatic ascent is after coming off the plains into the flatlands of New Mexico at 3000 feet to make the final climb to Cloudcroft. Until the highway was built in early 1940, a rail spur brought all the freight and passengers up the steep slope of the mountain range. Lowland families of style and means fled the hotter climates to the luxurious railroad hotel on the summit.

Dim recollections remain of a great uncle and his wife in Fort Worth spending the summer in Cloudcroft in the 1930s. He made all his dough practicing medicine. However, the rest of the family, all Depression-strapped herders, realized he belonged to the upper class after a niece visited and reported the good doctor and his spouse kept cats inside their two-story brick home. We knew then we had a rich uncle. In all the shortgrass country, the only cats living under cover were tabbies lucky enough to find a hole underneath the house.

She claimed the doctor's cats ate liver from the butcher shop, but we didn't believe "Ol Unc" or anyone else had that much money.

Once the Cloudcroft highway was built, it took a few years for truckers to learn not to dive the steep roads without cooled brakes. Nothing special, however, has to be done to the carburetors of automobiles. I do have to pocket my hearing aids, or the sudden change in altitude will pop them out every time I swallow. Women experience difficulty applying makeup for awhile. The thin mountain air causes such severe inflating and deflating of the lungs in flatlanders that panting to catch their breaths, putting rouge on milady's cheeks or dabbing lipstick on her quivering lips is like trying to draw a brand on a humpy cow in an open chute.

The best way to explain the difference is by comparing girls who summer in the mountains to visitors. I ate breakfast the first morning in a six-stool restaurant presided over by a blonde, green eye-shadowed, red-rouged lady wearing black lipstick coordinated with her shoes and mesh stockings. Over at a table against the wall, a younger lady just in from Dallas complexion-matched the pattern of her hot cakes. You couldn't tell whether she was looking at the pancakes or just her reflection in the plate.

At dinner, a double for the waitress seated us in the dining room of the old railroad hotel. She patronized the same beautician as the other lady, unless there were two bottles of peroxide and an extra palette of face paints in Cloudcroft. Seated about were fashionable ladies decked in white pearls and coifed in ash gray hair touching dark black dresses. Under candlelight, shadows concealed cosmetic success or failure.

Subdued piano music enhanced an aura of romance more potent than a fullblown case of "moonlight lunacy." Young men, in particular, leaned as far over the linen-covered tables as torsos permitted, gazing into their table mate's eyes with a passion as blinding as a double-stitched eyepatch and as hot as the tip of a soldering iron. I wanted to warn those lads that the misty eyed look in the girls' eyes might be from the mountain air fogging their contacts, but gaining a lovesick man's attention runs 75 to one against success, and the odds increase 10 points every hour until daybreak.

The fellow renting the cabins said his business was off 30 percent this summer. He claimed that about the time people became resigned to high gasoline prices, an arsonist set a forest fire 30 miles from town and spooked off more folks. The only mention of the black bear menace was the

night he mapped a foot trail to climb up to the hotel.

"Saves six miles of driving: just don't stumble onto a bear." The Roswell newspaper the day before reported a ninety year-old woman being killed by a black bear, so I turned down his gas-saving tip in favor of a ride around the lighted highway.

The descent back to the lower country is marked by directions and distances to escape routes for trucks without brakes. Small orchards and guest ranches dot the few smooth places in the canyons. Vistas from the road give the full flavor of New Mexico looking across a vast desert of white sand to a horizon of craggy purple mountains. I wondered how "Uncle" and "Auntie" felt riding the railroad spur the first leg going home to Fort Worth so many decades ago. Funny no one in the family ever mentioned what happened to them or their house full of cats.